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Testimony

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The Middle East and the United Nations

I thank Congresswomen Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Chairperson of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, for inviting me to testify on “The Middle East and the United Nations.”

The United Nations and Israel

I became engaged in working in the U.N. system 22 years ago when I became U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. offices in Vienna, Austria. Among the first issues that I dealt with was Israeli credentials at the 1983 Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency. The year before Israeli credentials for the IAEA Conference had been denied. Fortunately, due to vigorous work in Washington, Vienna and in capitals, Israeli credentials were not directly challenged at the 1983 Conference nor have they been subsequently. Some years later, as Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs I fought the pernicious U.N. resolution that equated Zionism with racism.

As Ambassador to the United Nations for Special Political Affairs in New York, I often confronted double standards in the U.N. Security Council, especially regarding Israel. I remember one meeting of the Security Council that took place right after a meeting of the Quartet. As I'd learned to expect, my Syrian colleague used the meeting to attack Israel. Also as I'd learned to expect, but what nonetheless constantly disappointed me, many other delegations attacked Israel. My British colleague joined in many of the criticisms of Israel, even expressing sentiments that directly undercut the Quartet statement about the peace process made the day before. After the meeting, when I expressed my disappointment at what he had said, British Ambassador Stuart Eldon said, “Oh Rich, this is just politics. You can't take it so seriously.”

Ambassador Eldon was right. For him and most of the Security Council members, posturing on the Middle East and attacking Israel is “just politics.” It is the accepted norm within the United Nations. It is just what one does on the Middle East issue. When I would say to the U.N. Security Council that any reference to excessive Israeli force in the West Bank must be balanced by a condemnation of the terrorist attacks by Hamas, I made my colleagues uncomfortable. However great the merits of my demand, it was socially and politically unacceptable. Invariably, the consequence of my demand was that, rather than mention the Arab terrorist activities, the Security Council then issued no press statement whatsoever.

And just last spring, I served as Ambassador and United States Representative to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland. Last year, as in earlier years, the Commission on Human Rights was exploited by some in their relentless campaign to delegitimize Israel, the oldest democracy in the Middle East. While all other country specific concerns are lumped together under UNCHR agenda item 9, Israel is singled out with its own, separate agenda item. The excessive, invective rhetoric assaulting Israel is numbing. The one-sided resolutions are scandalous. On human rights, no nation is blameless. All countries should be vigilant to improve their own human rights records. But the singling out of Israel in this

manner reveals more about the double standards and abuse within the U.N. system than it does about alleged human rights failures by the State of Israel.

I believe that over the years the United Nations has marginalized itself in many ways on the Israeli/Palestinian issue. The U.N. lacks moral authority on this matter. To the extent member states believe their rhetoric and actions on the Middle East in the U.N. are “just politics” that should not be taken seriously, is the extent to which the U.N. itself cannot be taken seriously.

Unfortunately, the bias against Israel in the United Nations is significant.

The Arab bloc within the Non-Aligned Movement and the G-77 has effectively used the General Assembly as a forum for isolating Israel. With their numbers, they have easily passed harsh anti-Israel resolutions in the General Assembly. I already have mentioned the most notorious, U.N. General Assembly Resolution 3379 adopted in 1975 equating Zionism with Racism. It was finally rescinded in 1991 following the Madrid Conference.

Over the past several years an average of 18 resolutions critical of Israel have been adopted by the General Assembly each year. The Arab group and the Non-Aligned Movement often have challenged the credentials of the Israeli delegation at the beginning of General Assembly sessions. The most recent challenge was in May 2002 prior to the U.N. General Assembly Session on Children. No other member state faces such routine attacks.

Of the ten Emergency Special Sessions held by the General Assembly, six have been on the Middle East, four of which have been critical of Israel. Meetings of the tenth Emergency Special Session on Occupied East Jerusalem started in 1997, met most recently in 2002 and remains “suspended” to facilitate the reopening of the issue. Since June 1996, the financing of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, has become politicized in the Fifth Committee and Plenary as countries hostile to Israel seek to attribute responsibility on Israel for the April 18, 1996, Qana incident and demand Israel’s payment for damages.

The U.N. Commission on Human Rights routinely adopts a disproportionate number of resolutions concerning Israel. Over the past three sessions, the Commission on Human Rights resolutions critical of Israel average 6-7% of the total number of resolutions adopted while many rogue states that are among the worst abusers of human rights are not criticized at all. Of all condemnations by the Commission on Human Rights, twenty-six percent refer to Israel alone.

Several divisions of the U.N. Secretariat and U.N. committees established over United States’ obligations are critical of Israel. They are discriminatory and one-sided. United States efforts to eliminate them have been unsuccessful. They include the Division for Palestinian Rights of the U.N. Secretariat, the Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices in the Occupied Territories, and the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

President Bush has sought to counter this U.N. bias and hostility against Israel. The Administration has sought to prevent U.N. bodies from unfairly targeting Israel. The Bush Administration has not hesitated to vote against resolutions singling Israel out for criticism. In 2002 the Bush Administration announced that the United States would veto any Security Council

resolution on the Middle East that did not condemn Palestinian terror attacks and name Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aksa Martyrs Brigade as the groups responsible for the attacks. The Bush Administration also has made clear that any U.N. Security Council resolutions must note that any Israeli withdrawal is linked to the security situation, and that both parties must be called upon to pursue a negotiated settlement.

President Bush has demonstrated leadership on the Middle East issue. He has called for reform of Palestinian governance, and some reform has happened. He has developed a Road Map to resolve the conflict that will ensure Israel's security and allow an independent Palestinian state. Working with the Quartet (the U.S., the European Union, Russia and the U.N.) and working directly with the countries in the region, President Bush will continue to provide leadership in trying to resolve this conflict.

However the United Nations, due to its long history of bias against Israel, has limits on how central a role it can play in these efforts. The U.N. moral authority and standing to contribute significantly to the resolution of this conflict has been compromised.

By distorting the United Nations agenda and using resolutions to relentlessly attack a member state, the majority of U.N. members have contradicted the U.N. Charter, defied its values, and diminished the United Nations as an institution.

Having briefly reviewed this litany of assaults on the State of Israel within the United Nations, let me emphasize that it is not exhaustive. There have been other efforts in the U.N. to delegitimize Israel. But the attacks that I have reviewed provide sufficient justification for proposed House Resolution 54. I believe it would be useful to have such an expression of the House of Representatives regarding anti-Semitism at the United Nations. The attacks on Israel are disproportional, one-sided and wrong. They are impediments to progress in resolving the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. And they bring discredit on the United Nations.

The U.N. and other matters in the Middle East

Having discussed the case of efforts within the United Nations to delegitimize Israel, let me briefly touch on a couple of other matters in the Middle East where the U.N. has played a role.

A situation in which the United Nations has been useful has been U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, adopted on September 2, 2004, and subsequent actions supporting the full sovereignty and independence of Lebanon, free of all foreign forces. The Government of Syria had imposed its political will on Lebanon, and compelled the Cabinet and Lebanese National Assembly to amend its constitution and abort the electoral process by extending the term of the Syrian-backed president of Lebanon by three years. This resolution, introduced by the United States and France with the co-sponsorship of Germany and the United Kingdom, supported the extension of control of the Government of Lebanon. This Security Council resolution also made clear that the continued presence of armed Hizballah militia elements, as well as the presence of the Syrian military and Iranian forces in Lebanon, hinders that goal. Through this Security Council resolution in the United Nations, the international community was able to express the view that it was wrong for Syria to continue to maintain its forces in Lebanon in contravention

of the spirit and clear intent of the Taif Accord. And it made known its view that it would be wrong of Syria to continue to interfere in the presidential electoral process in Lebanon.

While the situation in Lebanon has not entirely sorted out, Syrian President Asaad has announced that his troops will withdraw from Lebanon and partial withdrawal has begun. Public demonstrations for an independent Lebanon are animating a political transition in Lebanon. And the international community, working through the United Nations, contributed to push for these positive developments.

Finally, let me briefly discuss Iraq. The United Nations has a mixed record on dealing with Iraq.

After Saddam Hussein's illegal occupation of Kuwait, the United Nations Security Council passed a series of resolutions condemning the invasion and occupation, and demanding Iraqi withdrawal. When Saddam failed to comply with these U.N. Security Council demands, the use of force was authorized to repel the Iraqi occupying forces. And when Saddam's troops had been defeated, the U.N. Security Council imposed the most intrusive arms inspection in history on Iraq in an effort to dismantle Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. The subsequent arms inspections contributed to substantially dismantling and destroying Saddam's WMD stockpiles and capabilities. In each of these stages, the United Nations played a very useful role.

By the late 1990's, some U.N. Security Council members valued commercial opportunities more highly than continued vigorous monitoring of Iraqi arms. Further U.N. arms inspections were prevented by Saddam with little cost to him, and the United Nations Oil-For-Food program was initiated. We now are learning the extent of the troubling corruption and abuse in the U.N. administration of the Oil-For-Food program. In 2002, President Bush returned the matter of Iraqi non-compliance to U.N. resolutions to center stage. A seventeenth resolution was adopted, U.N.S.C. Resolution 1441, stating Iraq was in violation of prior U.N. resolutions, demanding immediate Iraqi pro-active compliance with the prior arms inspection resolutions, and stating a failure to immediately and fully comply with Resolution 1441 would be met with "serious consequences," which was well understood to be the use of force.

Unfortunately, when Saddam Hussein did not fully comply with U.N.S.C. Resolution 1441, the Security Council was not able to pass an 18th resolution explicitly authorizing the use of force. This demonstrated structural and procedural weaknesses in the U.N. Security Council.

Since the "Coalition of the Willing" led by the United States and the United Kingdom successfully brought down Saddam Hussein's regime, the United Nations has passed a series of resolutions dealing with the occupation, reconstruction and elections. These United Nations actions have contributed to progress in post-conflict Iraq.

So the case of Iraq has demonstrated ways and means where the United Nations has been useful in dealing with a very difficult situation in the Middle East, and instances where the U.N. performance has been disappointing. But going forward in Iraq, the United Nations can play a constructive role. And I anticipate the United States and others will work actively in the U.N. to ensure it does so.

Summary

In the Middle East, the United Nations offers promise and it has displayed disappointment. Like many large institutions, it's a mixed bag. The challenge for the United States Government is to engage the United Nations and work hard to help it realize its promise. If we fail to do so, it will disappoint and opportunities for programs will be missed.

Thank you.